

Jammin' in Kosovo

Story and Photos by Marcia L. Klein

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SSG Bobby Williams was frequently the spark that lit the concerts, jamming with some '70s funk if the crowds weren't getting into the music. He's a veteran of other USA Express tours and the Army's Battle of the Bands.

THE concert got off to a rocky start. The squeal of microphone feedback echoed through the room as curls of smoke sent signals from an ailing amp. The audience began heckling the band as bass player PFC Framy Diaz struggled with the disabled amp.

It would have been a good time for the band to pack up and go home — except that home was thousands of miles away.

The turning point came when Diaz gave into his frustration, tested the strings on his bass and sent a defiant solo back at the audience to show them just what he could do. From there on the night was a thing of beauty — audience and band members joining together in the music.

This isn't just the success story of a small band that won over its audience. It's the story of soldiers entertaining their own. The eight-member USA Express band, the first of three scheduled to tour military installations this year, completed a three-month tour of the Middle East, the Balkans and other parts of Europe in March. The soldier-musicians did it to give something back to soldiers sacrificing on today's front lines.

"I would like somebody to come and play music for me if I'm deployed. So, I think what we're doing is important for them," said Diaz, an M1A1 tank driver.

Like Diaz, the other members of the band are soldiers first, but are using their musical talents to entertain their deployed peers.

"God has blessed me to be able to

play and sing," said SSG Bobby Williams, the band's lead guitarist. "To have the opportunity to go out there and entertain those soldiers, to let them know how much we appreciate them, is worth any sacrifice we're going through, any troubles, anything. It's small compared to the price they're paying being in the Balkans, promoting democracy."

Williams, an artilleryman, headed for his new assignment in Korea following his tour with USA Express.

USA Express bands began touring six years ago, to entertain soldiers deployed over the Thanksgiving through New Year holidays. It's really a mission that soldiers can do best.

"We can send civilian entertainers to Kosovo because it's a peacekeeping mission, but it's less expensive to send USA Express, and as soldiers they can stay in tents when necessary. Civilian entertainers can't," said Nick



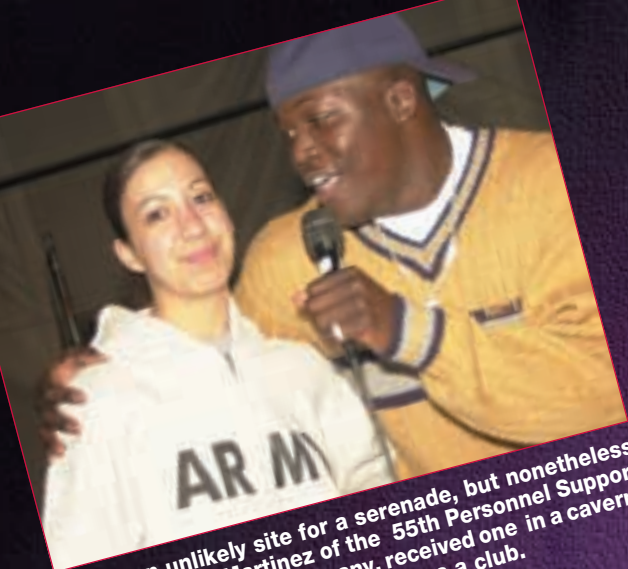
SGT Robert Byrd croons an R&B number during a performance at Camp Able Sentry, Macedonia, during a three-month tour of parts of the Middle East, the Balkans and Europe.



SGT Darren Starling, drummer, brought some of his own gear on tour to ensure every performance was his best. The band performed more than 40 shows during the tour, playing a variety of tunes for appreciative audiences throughout the Balkans and Europe.

Credginton, who schedules band appearances for the Army Entertainment Division of the Army Community and Family Support Center in Alexandria, Va. "Where it impacts most is in the Middle East, where we literally cannot send civilian female entertainers — but a soldier is a soldier. We fill in those gaps — that's

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It was an unlikely site for a serenade, but nonetheless SPC Elizabeth Martinez of the 55th Personnel Support Battalion, in Hanau, Germany, received one in a cavernous helicopter hanger disguised as a club.

our job.”

Although it was time away from the band members’ military jobs, the Middle East and Balkans tour was no vacation. The musicians were their own “roadies,” unloading 150 pieces of equipment and luggage at each stop, and often catching what sleep they could on buses between stops.

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“I was used to traveling and being in a different room or on a different cot every night, so I was ready for this,” said vocalist PFC Shona Mills, who had just completed a half-year assignment with the Soldier Show before beginning with USA Express. “But to feel how cold it is — and to see soldiers standing out there with their weapons, carrying them 24-7, hour after hour, staying in the same BDUs — they deserve a lot.”

Audience members returned the compliment, saying how much they appreciated the quality and variety of the music played by USA Express.

“When you get to a small camp like this, it’s important to get everybody together, and a concert is a great time to do it. Bands like USA Express get everybody dancing and having a good time and music’s the common thing,” said SPC Dot Salisbury, with the 96th Military Police, Baumholder, Germany, deployed to Camp Monteith in eastern Kosovo.

That common bond not only linked U.S. soldiers of all ranks and back-

grounds, but also soldiers from other countries. At NATO headquarters in Pristina, Kosovo, German, French and Hungarian soldiers were among troops who cheered on a Canadian doing the “Boot Scootin’ Boogie” with SPC Shameka Moran, from Brunswick, Ga., one of the band’s two female singers.

“I could see the glow and spark in the soldiers after the concerts,” said Silvia Joiner, an MWR recreation specialist who recently returned to Germany from Macedonia. “When I first got there I thought ‘these people don’t smile, they don’t do anything; what is wrong with this place?’ Then we had our first show and you could just immediately see how the whole camp brightened up. Everybody was just smiling and they came up and said, ‘Hey, great, this was wonderful!’”

Jim Rose, the lead MWR specialist at Camp Monteith, said soldiers “overwhelmingly said USA Express was fantastic, a good variety. These are the types of shows we need.”

As long as there are USA Express bands, that need will be filled. Because, as Williams said at the end of each show: “This is our way, personally, and the Army’s way of saying ‘thank you’ for being here and doing this, because your presence means the hope of freedom.” □

Join USA Express

FOLLOWING in the footsteps of USA Express I, the second USA Express band recently completed its tour of the Balkans, along with a few recruiting stops stateside before leaving for Europe.

A third group will begin rehearsals this month. Although the itinerary has not been finalized, tentative plans are for the third USA Express band to tour Far East and Pacific installations.

The Army Entertainment Division of the Community and Family Support Center welcomes videotapes from soldiers interested in joining USA Express. A letter giving command permission for the soldier to participate must be included in the application package. Videotapes of live performances are preferred. If soldiers are both singers and instrumentalists, they should include performances showcasing all their skills.

For more information on applying, call Nick Credgington at (703) 806-5839 or (DSN) 656-5839, or Cordell Hall at (703) 806-5250; or e-mail nicholas.credgington@cfsc.army.mil or cordell.hall@cfsc.army.mil. Send tapes to Army Entertainment Division, P.O. Box 439, Fort Belvoir, VA 22060.

— Marcia L. Klein



Mud — like this at Camp Monteith — and cold and isolation were all pervasive at the camps in Kosovo, making the high-energy performances by USA Express that much more appreciated.